

## Writing and Research in the Philippines: Comparative Notes

First of all, allow me to congratulate the Third World Studies Center and the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy for this activity: a “writeshop” devoted to encouraging the composing (and the finessing) of cutting-edge and socially progressive research—this time with an emphasis on the process of getting scholarly articles published.

I am particularly delighted by the fact that one of the many things that distinguish the University of the Philippines (UP) is precisely the singular existence of this Center, whose work and very name emblazon and preserve the historical moment of anticolonial nationalism that still must inform—I ardently believe—our university’s inmost vision.

As we know, the value of the name “Third World” exceeds the merely analytical: the conceptual field to which it initially referred was never entirely evident or even logical to begin with, being that unlike the first and the second, this “tertiary” manner of existence was supposed to denominate not so much the economic mode of production as the inflictions and traumas of colonial subjugation. As some of us who live in this world all too defiantly know, the value of this signifier lies in its ability to cast the brute reality of historical privilege in stark relief, eliciting discomfiture among “those whom history had provided a more comfortable bed” (as NVM Gonzalez once plainly put it).

I once witnessed this label’s affective power when, back in the summer of 2004, after casually referring to myself as “having come from the Third World”—over dinner at a nice little tapas bar with academics and artists from the University of Amsterdam—the tipsy Dutch man sitting beside me whispered conspiratorially into my ear that I should not speak of myself that way. He looked well-meaning enough (as well as goo-goo-eyed, on account of the booze), and then and there it occurred to me that to the educated citizens of the Global North, this

term possibly presents a jaggedly clear reminder of the existential pecking order of planetary livability—something they do not necessarily wish to remember, actually (especially not in polite company).

As much as I am currently partial to the equally clumsy and entirely provisional categories “postcolonial” and “Global South,” I would like to believe that, all told, these terms that signify material conditionalities (in both the broadest and the most basic sense) do not comprise a narrative of supersession. Rather, I would like to believe that they profess their own respective expediencies and limitations, and for this reason they work well in this or that discursive context (thus, they don’t cancel each other out at all) . . .

I suppose I can speak a little about publishing, being that I have been at the helm of the UP Press for nearly three years now. While the UP Press is not in the business of publishing academic journals, it is in the business of publishing academic books, which I would like to distinguish from literary and creative titles. Allow me to tell you that, from my experience, these manuscripts really are different types of material, especially as we receive and process them.

I do not mean that creative and scholarly works are different in their fundamental “natures” (of course they are, if nature is the same thing as form). I mean that my editorial experience in the press has taught me that the quality of the submitted manuscript generally differs between these two compositional “realms.” Literary manuscripts are generally either accepted or rejected, while scholarly manuscripts are very rarely endorsed by our reviewers as they are. Quite often they are not even endorsed, and those that are normally come with the express proviso—from the typically “aggravated” reviewer—that they be revised and improved, particularly where the aspect of their overall written-ness is concerned. What magnifies the chasm between creative and scholarly works that are submitted to the UP Press is that—at least as far as I have seen them—the former easily outnumber the latter, almost 4-to-1.

Briefly I would like to share with you my thoughts on just why this discrepancy exists. On the one hand, there is the relative newness of literacy and the enduring orality that permeate Philippine social relations. Despite the intervening decades, the philosopher-historian Walter J. Ong is still the authority to consult on this matter, for his work on the differences between oral and chirographic (or textual) cultures does prove propitiously germane and generative, inasmuch as it bids us to be mindful of the possibility that the cognitive dissonances

that afflict us as a society are at least partially the effects of secondary orality. In other words, the provisionality of aggregative and repetitive memory, the mutability of categories, the resistance against abstraction, the agonism of narrativity, the persistence of tactile and personalistic communal norms that effectively shut meritocracy out—all these observed and “lamented” qualities of our local and national realities are directly attributable to the residual but entirely powerful effects of oral consciousness, which obtains alongside the uneven, functional literacy of the last one hundred years of Philippine post/colonial history.

It seems necessary, in pursuing this argument, to qualify that orality can stay residual (and yet entirely determinative) even centuries after the introduction of writing: in this respect Ong invokes, as a compelling example, the evidence provided by post-Homeric Greece. In the case of the Philippines in particular, we can more or less conclude that orality was the dominant cultural mode, despite the “inflated” claims of the Hispanic archive that the Philippine *indios* were mostly already literate at the time of the Conquista. It is important to remember that no acceptable evidence has ever been found to back the spurious claim that the *baybayin* or native syllabary that minimally existed in the Philippine islands was ever widespread, popular, pervasive, or even just uniformly operative during this period. Instead, what we have are comparable accounts of general illiteracy as being the norm even among the class of local chieftains.

Add to this the more recent attestations coming from anthropology and folklore studies—both of which provide more than ample proof in terms as various and as cogent as oral epics, proverbs, “epigrammatic poetry,” riddles, etc.—and we get a relatively stable and clear picture of the unequivocal dominance of the oral mode of consciousness in the country’s colonial and precolonial pasts, and its residual but still significant presence in the Philippine present, which is constitutively beset precisely by the vital contradictions that this hybrid cultural condition—this peculiarly and residually oral “mentality”—by turns engenders and foments. Allow me to propose the interesting but self-evident idea that this is a condition that militates against categorical thinking in general, and writing in particular. Hence: the persistence of personalism and clientelist ties—alongside the paucity of reflective textualizations—is everywhere in evidence among the vast majority of our people. Hence: the general difficulty experienced by Filipino academics in producing cultural research.

On the other hand, there is the question of why literary productions, self-reflexive in their own ways, despite being relatively scarce in relation to the size of our national population, would seem to be at least faring better than scholarly works, which (as I said) come few and far between, and are generally more flawed in their presentation. Here I would like to speak about a realization that dawned on me during a little seminar that I attended over a year ago, sponsored by the Office of the Chancellor of UP Diliman. Upon the request of then Chancellor Caesar A. Saloma, in February 2013 the Likhaan: UP Institute of Creative Writing gathered together a panel of natural scientists, social scientists, and creative writers, all contemplating the topic “writing in the sciences and the professions.”

While the exciting things our group pondered, and the resolve to find solutions to the problem of poor public dissemination—as well as the deteriorating quality—of academic writing by our graduate students and members of the faculty, were undoubtedly important bequests of this experience, personally speaking I can say that it was an immense privilege just to be there, to meet and listen to some of our university’s most wonderful and brilliant minds. In the course of conversing with our colleagues across the disciplines, soon enough it occurred to me that one of the reasons creative writing is in a relatively good state in our country is that, over the past half-century, national writers workshops, typically identified with the country’s major schools—UP, Silliman University, Ateneo de Manila University, University of Santo Tomas (UST), De La Salle University (DLSU), and Mindanao State University—have provided sustained and “heartening” institutional support. The important thing to remember is that these workshops are national in scope, as well as intensely competitive. Needless to say, they are regarded, in the literary community, as prestigious, precisely for these reasons.

As workshops, they also function as a means of according reward or recognition to young and promising writers. Because the “fellowships” that they offer are, in a manner of speaking, forms of endowment or grants, they provide the personally pleasing opportunity for aspiring writers to learn from—and be in the company of—published senior writers, inside a “space” or occasion that is exclusively devoted to the otherwise solitary and “sullen art” of literary creation. As it has been practiced, the workshop format therefore makes learning the intricacies of creative writing at once interesting, gratifying, social, and fun.

I am very happy to learn that the Third World Studies Center—and the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy—by conducting this “writeshop,” is already in fact addressing this vital need. As I see it, if the university as a whole wishes to proceed in this direction, various “academic writing workshops” must be held in earnest, and they should be sectional or “cluster-based” by definition, since the theories and methodologies across the human, natural, and physical sciences and the arts and humanities are much too divergent to be subsumed under a single aegis.

Suffice it to say that while the compositional rudiments of good academic writing can arguably be identified as common across these disciplines, these workshops should not be devoted to this “mechanical” aspect alone. In fact, to my mind, the workshop discussions, moderated by panelists who are authorities in the fields and/or areas pertinent to the chosen manuscripts, will need to range across the polarities of proper form on the one hand, and coherent and forceful content on the other. This means that the fellow whose manuscript is being discussed will be aided not only in the proper way of composing a scholarly or critical article but also, conceivably, in the matter of the article’s actual “substance”—from the appropriateness of its theoretical framework, to the rigor of its arguments and assertions, to the relevance of its findings and conclusions . . .

A workshop for the arts and humanities cluster can, for instance, be organized relatively painlessly, and it will, most likely, prove immensely productive in the end. Suffice it to say that the reason it is possible for students in the various disciplines across the arts and humanities to speak to and learn from one another is, of course, the contemporary ascendancy and inescapability of critical theory, whose basic assumptions range across all of them, and whose specific conceptual frameworks—Marxist, feminist, postcolonialist, globalist, queer, etc.—find their different nuances and inflections but do in fact obtain in all these fields of study. This is the reason UST and DLSU have been holding their national criticism workshops over the last decade or so: critics of the visual, performing, and literary arts can, in fact, sit down and productively discuss their critical manuscripts together, since they are all, by necessity, conversant with the premises of theory, which we can perhaps summarize into the following general “statements”: there are no essences, only constructions; ideology is inescapable; language constitutes and constructs both consciousness and the world it perceives; there is no essential difference between creative and critical texts, since both are simply instances of signification; textual

meaning in itself is never absolute or definite; and totalizing and universal concepts are forms of dangerous fiction . . .

I apologize for the rambling nature of these “opening remarks,” but what I have tried to do here is make some random observations and proffer some (hopefully useful) suggestions. Needless to say, I am confident that the UP Diliman administration—in cooperation with the pertinent offices at the system level—will be open to seriously considering and supporting such initiatives, especially since already there is the example and encouragement that your activity here today brilliantly provides, both the academic establishment as well as the grim and determined scholars who are all endeavoring to arrest the variable and the negotiable—by textualizing Filipino life, which is by no means a simple task, given the anti- or indeed pre-textual “cognitive dispensation” within which we all must work, in our university as well as outside it.

Again, congratulations, and more power.

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